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## Sir William Mure: His Place in Literary History

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## Notes and Documents

### Sir William Mure: His Place in Literary History

Recently in these pages Sir William Mure was presented, in a note by Mr. Ronald Jack, as a poet neglected because of a false view of his place in literary history.<sup>1</sup> The fresh place suggested for him—as “anticipating the Metaphysical influences which were soon to sweep the country”—is interesting but here and there the basis of the argument advanced is insecure.

William Mure of Rowallan, the poet, was later by a generation than is stated. He was indeed a kinsman of the first sonneteer of Scottish poetry, Alexander Montgomerie, and he himself declared his poetic debt to the elder “maister poet.” He was, however, not his nephew but his great-nephew. The family tree as drawn by Cranstoun, editing the *Poems* of Montgomerie in 1886 (Scottish Text Society) was corrected by Stevenson, editing the *Poems: Supplementary Volume* in 1910 (S.T.S.).<sup>2</sup>

No dates are suggested by Mr. Jack for the composition of the poems of Mure that he discusses, the “Spiritual Sonnets”; these eleven sonnets, with no such entitling, were presented at the end of Volume I of the *Works of Sir William Mure* (S.T.S., 40 [1898]), after *The True Crucifixe for True Catholickes* (Edinburgh, 1629). The editor, William Tough, was working from printed texts and from a manuscript of Mure’s poetry whose whereabouts is not now known; he presented the poems apparently in chronological order of composition.<sup>3</sup> It is not clear to me whether these sonnets were part of that printed volume or simply believed by Tough to be later than it in composition. They are very credibly later than “Fancies Farewell” which records the poet’s turn-

<sup>1</sup> “Scottish Sonneteer and Welsh Metaphysical,” *SSL*, III (1966), 240-247.

<sup>2</sup> The genealogy as given by Boson Gabriel de Montgomery in *Origin and History of the Montgomerys* (Edinburgh & London, 1948) is wildly confused.

<sup>3</sup> Tough’s introduction mentions the Rev. William Muir, editor of *The Historie of the House of Rowallan* as preparing for publication in 1625 [?1635] “*The Poetical Remains of Sir William Mure written from the year 1611 to 1635*; this project seems to have fallen through” (p. xviii). Mr. Jack in fairness to Tough’s opinion on Montgomerie’s poetry should have noted his observation on p. xix: “His later poems contain his most serious and original work.”

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ing from composition of amorous or worldly poetry to the writing solely of devotional poetry. They may well come between 1629 and 1635.<sup>4</sup> If this is so, they may indeed anticipate pieces by Vaughan but they belong to a decade that knew works of John Donne in manuscript if not in the print of 1633.

On this issue of "one of the later Scots sonneteers . . . anticipating Metaphysical influences" Mr. Jack also suggests parallels between poems by Sir Robert Ayton and certain of the "Songs and Sonets" and "Elegies" of Donne. Sir Robert Ayton was certainly of the generation intervening between Montgomerie and Mure. While Ayton's poems, Scots and English, are some of them undatable with any accuracy, a chronology of many of them has been suggested both in my *Poems and Songs of Sir Robert Ayton* (1961) and in Dr. Gullans' edition of Ayton's poetry for the Scottish Text Society (1963). By and large these chronologies agree. Of the pieces cited by Mr. Jack, "Unhappy eyes" (STS 17), belongs in all probability to the period 1600-1605; but "To view thy beauty well" (STS 18), which was grouped with it as of like date by Dr. Gullans, belongs to Ayton's *poésie courtoisanesque* and in my opinion could have been written at any point up to the poet's death in court circles in 1638. Mr. Jack invites a comparison of "STS 33" to Donne's "The Will" "for a parallel between lover and gambler." But "STS 33" is "Upone Tobacco" and is a translation from the French of St. Amant. Was it intended rather to draw a comparison between Donne's poem and STS 44, "Lov's like a game at Irish"? But that again is *poésie courtoisanesque* and possibly late—and in that instance the single image occurring in Donne's quite different poem constitutes no parallel. (The likening of lover to gambler has, moreover, a long pedigree.) "STS 55" can surely not have been intended, for that is a piece belonging to the "Platonick-antiplatonick" fashion at the court of King Charles and can be dated with some accuracy as 1630-1633, as Dr. Gullans has shown. This is no *anticipation* of Donne's metaphysical imagery. Again, "STS 42," "Upone a gentlewoman that painted," a satire on the maquillage of a court lady, is in no sense a parallel to Donne's "Elegie V, His Picture." Ayton and Donne were both in London from 1603 onwards, rivals for the post of Secretary to the Queen in 1611. Setting aside the question whether the imagery in Ayton's poetry is ever truly "Metaphysical,"

<sup>4</sup>William Mure the poet was said by Agnes Mure Mackenzie (in her chapter, "The Renaissance Poets: Scots and English" in *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, ed. James Kinsley [London, 1955]) to have lived on until 1657, in which case his eleven "late" sonnets might well postdate Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans* of 1650 and 1655. But in my reading of the Mure family tree she was here mistaken.

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priority for Ayton in any of these "parallels" would be difficult to maintain.

The poetry of William Mure has not been so neglected meantime as Mr. Jack believes. *Music of Scotland 1500-1700* (1957, 1964) showed Mure as a lyric poet writing words to match the music of a Scots *air de cour* and a "Hymne" to match an Elizabethan dance-song from England for which his great-uncle had already composed a set of words in courtly Scots, "Melancholie."<sup>5</sup> We know that Mure wrote songs also in another tradition, to match the "native air" or regional dance-song of Scotland—witness his "To the tune of ane new lilt" (1615), "To the tune of Pert Jean" (1615)—possibly for "Puirt Jean Lindsay"—and "Ane reply to *I cair not quither I get hir or no*" (1614). His is the earliest poetry on record to have been thus written to such tunes, except for "Balu" in "*The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*."

Mure is indeed a competent poet and his place in literary history is worthy of reappraisal, and not only on the lines suggested by Mr. Jack's study of parallels with Vaughan. He is also interesting as a songwriter, of the first generation to write courtly lyrics after the departure of the court from Scotland in 1603. A discussion of the poet on this second count is attempted in my *Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland under King James VI* to appear shortly from the Cambridge University Press.

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### Robert Burns and the Steuart Dinner

In early December, 1787, Robert Burns injured his knee so badly that he was unable to leave his room at William Cruikshank's, 2 St. James Square, Edinburgh, for several weeks; and he could get about only with difficulty thereafter until mid-February. This was the period of his famous correspondence with Clarinda, in which he dates his letters

<sup>5</sup> *Musica Britannica*, Vol. XV, introduction, p. xvii; Nos. 47 and 59 and notes. "Melancholie" in Montgomerie's *Poems*, ed. J. Cranstoun (STS) matches No. 47.